

Rural Alaska Allied Health Occupation Training

The demand for health care services across the United States is increasing, and rural Alaska is no exception. With many rural communities facing shortages of trained health care workers, the University of Alaska's Allied Health Alliance (AHA), assisted by the Denali Commission, decided to take action.

AHA is an alliance of university educators from across the state working together to expand education for allied health careers in Alaska. Recognizing rural Alaska's need for health care workers, and the importance of growing a local workforce to hold what are critical, lucrative, and permanent jobs in rural areas, AHA presented a training proposal to the Denali Commission in 2003. The Commission agreed to provide funding for occupational education for health care workers in rural Alaska. As a result the Allied Health Training Project was born.

Over the three year period from Fall 2004 through Spring of 2007, there were 1,034 enrollees in project courses. Occupations included Community Health Aide, Health Care Reimbursement (Biller/Coder), Pharmacy Technician, Phlebotomist, Clinical (Laboratory) Assistant, Dental Assistant, Radiologic Technician, Personal Care Attendant, Certified Nursing Assistant, and Community Wellness Advocate. Advanced skills training was provided for Community Health Aides, with 205 participants. More than one thousand individuals benefited from advising and other assistance.

University professors have found one of the most successful ways to teach students in rural Alaska is to bring the classroom to them. An important aspect of this project has been the development and conversion of classes and programs into distance deliverable formats in a variety of allied health fields. More than fifty courses are in development, pilot, implementation or dissemination phases. "Thanks to the Denali Commission funding we've made great strides toward creating distance education opportunities," says Sally Mead, Division Director of Allied Health Sciences at the University's Anchorage campus. "These innovative teaching approaches empower Alaskans to stay in Alaska and learn in the communities where they will continue to live and work."

Additionally, this project has sought to develop approaches to ensure success of health program trainees, including supplemental instruction, focused skills development and linkages between each program and its distance students.

Because there are limitations in what can be conveyed online or through teleconferencing, partnerships have been developed with regional health corporations and other entities to identify mentors on site who can work with students in person. One such mentor is Leslie Boelens of the Yukon-Kuskokwim Health Corporation. According to Boelens, "It has been very rewarding to work with our students and observe their professional development. One of the best aspects is that our students are able to pursue a quality education in their own communities while they work and care for their families and participate in their subsistence and cultural activities."

“Without our partnerships with the regional health care providers and our mentors,” reflects Jan Harris, Associate Dean of the College of Health and Social Welfare, “we could never provide the quality of education rural students are receiving. Hands-on clinical experience is essential to all of these programs.”

One health care student who has experienced success is Fred Lamont from St. Mary’s (population 540) in Southwest Alaska. A trained and certified phlebotomist, Fred is continuing his education in the Clinical Assistant program and plans to become a Medical Laboratory Technician. “The only shortcoming to distance education is there is no teacher in front of you with a chalk board. But, I did like being independent and doing the work on my own time,” he says. He also notes, “Services are delivered differently in the village. Education, like health care in rural Alaska, is a collaborative effort.”



Limited Radiography Class and
Professor, Bethel



Gerald Lamont and Patient
Clinical Assistant, St. Mary’s



Alexia Wassilie
Phlebotomy Graduate and Clinical Assistant
Student



Alma Kanrilak, CWA
Community Health Representative
Tununak, AK



Limited Radiography Students in Bethel
Sue Miller and Nina Mehagak



Daniel Charlie, Clinical Assistant, Toksook Bay



Billing and Coding Students, Nome